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ABSTRACT

This three-page guide provides teaching suggestions for learning activities for adult literacy education classes using the book "Missing May" by Cynthia Rylant. This book is about a 12-year-old girl, Summer, who has lived with her Aunt May and Uncle Ob since she was 6 years old. After May's death, Summer, Ob and a neighborhood boy begin to deal with their grief. Chapter-by-chapter suggestions are given, along with culminating activities for the entire book. The teaching techniques have been field-tested in a rural Cincinnati (Ohio) adult literacy class. Comments from the teacher who field-tested the suggestions as well as from the women students involved are included in this paper. (KC)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Teacher To Teacher

ED 413 475

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Trade Book Teaching Ideas from the OLRC Reading Group

Missing May

Author: Cynthia Rylant

Summary: Twelve-year old Summer has lived with Aunt May and Uncle Ob since she was six. Now May has died, and Summer is afraid that something will happen to Ob, who seems to have lost the will to live. Summer, Ob, and a neighborhood boy plan to search for a sign from May. In doing so, they begin to deal with their grief. (Note: This book won the Newbery Award in 1993 and several other book awards.)

Teaching Suggestions

Level 2 readers will be able to read this book independently. However, we suggest some variety in your overall plans-- teacher reads some chapters, learners read some independently, and so on. Learners may wish to keep response journals as they read the book. Perhaps after every couple of chapters, they can write in their journals. Topics for writing can be learner-selected, or the teacher can suggest that learners write about what they think, what is interesting or moving, favorite phrases or scenes, etc.

Chapters 1 and 2:

The teacher might read the first two chapters aloud. This will enable all learners to "get into" the plot and learn a bit about the characters. Then learners (alone or in pairs) might sketch or write about a character or the setting, using words and phrases from the book as guides.

Discussion after the first two chapters could center on the following questions using the "Think-Pair-Share" strategy. In "Think-Pair-Share," individual learners first think about each question, perhaps making notes to remind themselves of their ideas. Next pairs of learners share ideas with each other, and finally the teacher leads a whole-group sharing session. Individuals then attend to the next question, and the cycle begins again.

1. How do you feel about the story so far? about the characters? about the plot?
2. What has the author done to provoke these feelings?
3. What is the most important thing that has happened in the story so far? Why do you think so?

Chapters 3-5:

Ask learners to read these chapters independently. After reading, ask small groups (perhaps 3) of learners to a) consider each sentence below, b) decide if they agree or disagree with it, and c) make notes about the reasons for their decisions. After small groups have completed their tasks, invite whole-group sharing.

1. Ob is handling his grief well.
2. Summer is handling her grief well.

Rylant writes especially effective prose. Several quotes from the first few chapters are listed below. Learners may wish to reconsider these quotes, decide the meaning of each, and talk about how these quotes relate to the overall story.

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A. " 'Back in Ohio, where I'd been treated like a homework assignment somebody was always having to do, eating was never a joy of any kind. Every house I had lived in was so particular about its food, and especially when the food involved me. There's no good way to explain this. But I felt like one of those little mice who has to figure out the right button to push before its food will drop down into the cup. Caged and begging. That's how I felt sometimes." (p. 7)

B. " 'She felt like she did when we was packing up to go to Ohio,' he said simply, figuring I'd understand." (p. 13)

C. " 'Summer,' he said to me once, 'drop some of them bricks you keep hauling around with you. Life just ain't that heavy.' " (p. 23)

D. " 'I just figure May gave him permission to have some imagination.'

Cletus looked up at my face.

'Ob's got visions, Summer. Just like you, except you're always fighting yours off.' " (p. 39)

Chapters 6 and 7:

Use the DR-TA strategy. (See explanation attached.) Here are some suggested stopping points (but you may wish to add or delete stops depending on your group's needs):

p. 44 (bottom) after " 'Summer? I heard him..."
p. 46 (middle) after "I understood Ob's need to be alone."
p. 48 (top) after "...to take to shake some life..."
p. 49 (bottom) after "...since she passed on."
p. 51 after end of chapter
p. 53 (middle) after "my suitcase just in time..."
p. 55 (middle) after "a while."
p. 56 after end of chapter

Divide the group in thirds. Ask each small group to work on one of the major characters-- Ob, Summer, and Cletus. Ask them to talk about these people, their personalities, etc. Ask someone in each group to make notes. Invite whole group sharing after the small groups have finished. Focus discussion on how these characters are alike and how they are different. Learners may wish to follow up by making Venn diagrams that show how 2 characters are alike and different.

Chapters 8-10:

Ask learners to read these independently. After reading, use the "Think-Pair-Share" strategy (described above) to address these questions:

1. What did you read that surprised you? Why was this surprising?
2. How is Ob handling "missing May"? Why do you think so?
3. How is Summer handling "missing May"? Why do you think so?
4. How do you think the story will end? Why do you think so?

Chapters 11 and 12:

Teacher reads aloud.

As a culminating activity for the entire book, learners may wish to:

1. Do "Sketch to Stretch," in which each person sketches what s/he thinks is the most important (or interesting, or some other criterion) scene in the story. People share their sketches with one another, and other students comment on the sketched scene by telling what they recall, why the scene might have been important to the "artist," and so on.

2. Prepare a reader's theater script for a favorite scene. In reader's theater a story or a portion of a story is made into a script. Different learners "play" different parts. One person narrates. The group practices its scene several times and finally presents it for others. (Notes: Learners use their books or rewritten scenes. They do not need to memorize lines. Reader's theater involves no staging or props. Instead actors communicate with their voices.)

3. If students are interested in issues related to dealing with grief, you may wish to: a) invite discussion of differences in children's and adults' reactions to grief using Summer and Ob as examples; or b) find nonfiction descriptions of the stages of grief and read these to or with students.

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4. If students are interested in reading more about Appalachia, consult the OLRC Reading Group's list (web site: literacy.kent.edu). We have recommended many more titles that are set in Appalachia. Such a text set could be used to help students begin to draw conclusions about the nature of life in Appalachia, important cultural issues and aspects, etc.

Field Testing

The teaching ideas were field-tested in a rural Cincinnati adult class in which 5-6 women ranging in age from 19-43 formed a reading group each afternoon. All members of the group were advanced readers with one exception. The ethnic composition of the class included two African Americans and many with Appalachian roots. Most of the women were mothers, and several had experienced losing a family member. Consequently, most of the group found someone or some theme to identify with.

Teacher's Changes:

The teacher followed the teaching ideas perhaps two-thirds through the book, reading the first two chapters aloud and then encouraging the group to read and reflect on the assignments individually before discussing their responses and predictions. In addition to the specific predictions, she asked "What was the direction the author was going to take and why? What was her purpose in writing this story? What was she attempting to leave with her readers?" At that point, a parent of one the members of the group died. The teacher reported that the book led to whole class discussions on issues such as "Why attend funerals and visitations when we are overwhelmed with conflicting feelings of dread, obligation and responsibility?" "How do we handle these situations as parents? As participants in the rituals?" The discussions created so much interest that the initial readers finished the books without completing further activities in order to pass the book on to other readers. The teacher felt that the students wanted to move ahead rapidly because the reading level was not challenging enough advanced readers.

The teacher felt that the book was so successful that she plans to use the book again, this time paired with another book on death but with a different perspective.

Readers' Responses:

One reader described the reaction of the class to the reading group: "Our discussion must have been infectious, because almost all of our class wanted to participate. Students abandoned the guidelines, sometimes reading the entire book in one evening, so they could give a copy to another student. Not one person was disappointed."

In a class newsletter, a student remarks: "It was, in everyone's evaluation, a well-written book because of the story and the characters...This story, which initially seemed to be about death, really showed us that while we can all survive death, with love we can begin to live again."

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Reminders: ABLE teachers can order this book from Book Wholesalers, Inc. for 40% off list price. For other recommended books, see Recommended Trade Books for Adult Literacy Programs, available from ABLE Directors, public librarians, or online <**http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Resc/Trade/index.html**>. Call the OLRC for details.

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